A FILM OF MELVIN VAN PEEBLES THE ORIGINAL CAST SOUNDTRACK ALBUM

STAX RECORDS STEREO STS-3001

SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSSS SONG

A FILM OF MELVIN VAN PEEBLES THE ORIGINAL CAST SOUNDTRACK ALBUM

SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSSSS SONG AN OPERA

FEATURING

BRER SOUL
&
EARTH WIND & FIRE

Soundtracks Written & Composed by Melvin Van Peebles (ASCAP).
Published By: YEAH INC.
*Published By Alamo, courtesy of A & M Records.
†(Bye and Bye) Courtesy, Black Dues
Re-Mix Engineer: Dick Burns
Produced By: YEAH INC.

1: Sweetback Losing His Cherry...2.45

2: Sweetback Getting It Uptight and
Preaching It So Hard The Bourgeois
Reggin Angels In Heaven Turn Around...5.00

3: *Come On Feet...4.15

4: Sweetback's Theme...7.36

5: Hoppin John...2.25
Voices...0.11

6: Mojo Woman...2.43
Voices...0.15

7: Sanra Z...3.47
Voices...0.17

8: †Reggins Hanging On In There As Best They Can...2.58
Voices...1.13

9: Wont Bleed Me...2.41

10: The Man Tries Running His Usual Game But
Sweetback's Jones Is So Strong He Wastes The Hounds
(Yeah! Yeah! And Besides That Will Be
Coming Back Takin Names & Collecting Dues)...4.25

A Production of Yeah Inc.

YEAH INC.

stax RECORDS

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MELVIN VAN PEEBLES and JERRY GROSS present a CINEMATION INDUSTRIES Release • Color

PAPERBACK BOOK NOW AVAILABLE FROM LANCER PUBLICATIONS

A world without *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* seems almost unrecognizable. If Melvin Van Peebles hadn't scorned every bigoted skeptic to write, direct, produce, edit, score and star in his 1971 magnum opus, the entire genre of Blaxploitation cinema might not exist.

Before *Sweetback* grossed $15 million and became one of the biggest independent films in history [at the time], *Shaft* was originally about a white police detective—one who certainly wasn't a "sex machine to all the chicks." Without *Sweetback*, say goodbye to *Superfly* or *Foxy Brown*; there would be no *Cleopatra Jones*, *Black Caesar* or *Dolemite* either. To say nothing of those soundtracks and musical superstars they spawned.

The films of Quentin Tarantino and Spike Lee would look irrevocably different. Hip-hop itself would exist on a shakier and definitively less fly foundation. Earth, Wind & Fire may never have re-defined soul music and challenged pre-existing Gregorian calendar notions about the month of September.

Set in early-'70s Los Angeles, *Sweetback* spawned from a roiling cauldron of societal upheaval: six years after the Watts insurrection, three years after the assassinations of 1968 and the Black Power salutes of Tommie Smith and John Carlos. The Black Panthers became a unifying force in American ghettoes but battled vicious campaigns of harassment and persecution from both federal and local law enforcement.

It was an era when black people began to realize that peaceful non-resistance could only get you so far. The murder of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X ensured that the previous dream had died and the black power movement was born, with James Brown's mantra leading the charge: "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud."

For all the resistance mounting in the streets, no black director had yet made a film that captured the spirit of rebellion, frustration and the refusal to accept injustice. Van Peebles alchemized Malcolm X, Iceberg Slim and Soul on Ice with Huey Newton, Gil-Scott Heron and the French New Wave. Badass cinema was born.

The collision of such diverse influences isn't surprising when you consider Van Peebles' "Most Interesting Man in the World"-caliber resume. The son of a tailor from the Southside of Chicago, Van Peebles graduated high school at 16 and Ohio Wesleyan University at 20 (where he studied literature on an art scholarship). ROTC classes led him to the Air Force, where he flew jets for three years, covertly navigating the skies with an atomic bomb that he thankfully never dropped.

Upon being discharged, Van Peebles moved to Mexico where Mario was born in 1957. After returning to the states, he settled in San Francisco and found gainful employment as a grip man. At the apogee of the Beat era, Van Peebles wrote an article about his life working on the cable cars, which eventually became a book. One day, a gushing fan came onto the tracks searching for the writer of that tome—telling him it should be a "movie."

That was his "Newton under the apple tree" moment. With a little help, Van Peebles taught himself how to direct, film, edit and even score the music for his own films despite not knowing how to read or write music (he ingeniously numbered the keys of the piano and wrote numbers down that corresponded to each).

After making three short films and getting fired from the cable car gig (most likely due to racism), Van Peebles headed to Hollywood and in his own words, "they threw me down the steps." So using the GI Bill, he headed to the Netherlands to study his second love, mathematics.

Somehow, the short films made it to France, where the nascent New Wave scene hailed his genius. A screening near the Champs-Élysées yielded tons of praise but absolutely no money. But imbued with hope, Van Peebles sang and begged for money in Paris for the next several years—at least until a serendipitous twist of fate somehow led him to become a crime reporter for a major French newspaper. He wrote novels, became the editor of a French humor magazine and managed to procure a director's card (the loose equivalent of joining the Gallic Directors Guild).

Obtaining a partial government subsidy, Van Peebles made his first feature-length film, which wound up being named the winner of the San Francisco Film Festival. Hollywood came calling with an offer to helm *Watermelon Man*, a precursor to *Trading Places* about a prejudiced white man waking up in a black man's skin.

But nothing adequately prepared the world for the impact of *Sweetback*. A message at the beginning of the film dedicates it to "all the brothers and sisters that have had enough of the man." The credits read: "starring the black community." The titular role is played by Van Peebles, whose *Sweetback* grew up in a brothel where he lost his virginity at age 12 (Mario plays the young Sweetback in a very graphic opening scene).

While working at a sex show, two racist cops come in and use Sweetback as a temporary fall guy to pin a murder on. The plan is to let him go after a few days, but after he watches them brutalize a Black Panther, the taciturn Sweetback snaps and throttles the cops with his bare hands. He goes on the lam, deals with Hells Angels, hunting dogs and cops, but somehow makes it across the border to Mexico. It ends with him vowing to "collect dues" on the law.

It was unlike anything to ever hit American theaters—as though Eldridge Cleaver had written *Easy Rider*. The black protagonist not only overpowers the oppressive white cops, but he manages to get away with it. Van Peebles made the film for what was estimated at $150,000 (including a $50,000 loan from Bill Cosby when no one else stepped forward with funding). The shoestring budget raised another problem: how to market a movie with no promotional budget.

The solution was through music. During its filming, not only was there no band hired to play the score, the score itself remained unwritten. Due to some divine astrological quirk, Van Peebles' secretary was sleeping with one of the members of the then unknown Earth, Wind & Fire.

"They'd never done an album before. I wrote the music, and since I can't read or write music, I hummed it to them, taught them my musical method," Van Peebles said to RBMA in 2008. "They played it the way I asked them to and it became a huge hit. Before this, music, even in Hollywood, was not used as a selling tool. Even with a musical, they'd bring it out as a movie, then maybe bring out the album."

Realizing that a 15-second commercial cost a fortune, but a song played on the radio was constant free promotion, Van Peebles released the album first to build hype for *Sweetback*. Its success on the airwaves propelled the commercial reception of the film. At first, only two theaters agreed to screen the film, but the Black Panthers became so enamored with *Sweetback* that they demanded that all their members see it, and its popularity began to increase exponentially. Van Peebles estimates that it made $8 million before white people even discovered it.

"We were there when [Van Peebles] was in the editing room at Paramount Pictures, and he gave an idea of what a song was going to be. He was great; he was a very driven person, great imagination," Verdine White of Earth, Wind & Fire told *OffBeat Magazine*.

"It was a real different, real radical [movie]. It was a very radical time in America. We hadn't signed with Clive Davis at the time," he continued. "We were a very new group, so for us to do a soundtrack at the beginning of our careers was amazing. We were happy just to have stuff in the movie, to have our music on the big, wide screen. At the time, there weren't a lot of movies that had black music in it."

Interlaced with clips and dialogue from the film, the soundtrack is inextricable from what appeared on celluloid. It's equally profane and visionary. The first song, "Sweetback Losing His Cherry" juxtaposes the negro spiritual "Wade in the Water," with a woman moaning for a 12-year old boy to take her. The gospel song, "This Little Light of Mine," is interspersed with frenetic soul blasts courtesy of Earth, Wind & Fire. It upends any previous notions of sex, religion and violence to mirror the chaos and questioning of the era.

The soundtrack operates like a surrealist Mobius strip comprised of call-and-response chants against the man, preachers offering hosannas, gospel choirs and police sirens. On "Come on Feet," the score summons *Sweetback*'s frantic chase, with the chanted refrain, "Come on feet…come on legs…you know whitey's game."

The breakout song was fittingly "Sweetback's Theme," a nearly eight-minute gem of hypnotic jazz-soul. It exists as testament to the brilliant particle-spinning fusion of 1971; it's almost entirely genre-less, four corners of sound forming—where jazz, funk, soul and R&B blend into a timeless amalgam of black music. It's as avant-garde as the film's kinetic mix of psychedelic jump cuts and dream-like sequences. The music becomes a character itself, unseen but forcefully heard.

Almost a half-century after its release, *Sweetback* remains a touchstone for not just black film, but all independent cinema. You can see it's mark in the films of Ava DuVernay and Barry Jenkins, and as Van Peebles himself once joked, "I'm the godfather of the *Blair Witch Project*." You can hear bits of *Sweetback* in the sampledelic compositions of the legendary hip-hop producer Madlib, and on the classic Main Source *Breaking Atoms* album. It is there in every art form that demands that you keep your eyes open and your ears close to the soil.

–JEFF WEISS, MARCH, 2017

About Jeff Weiss

Jeff Weiss is editor of the *Passion of the Weiss* (passionweiss.com) and a columnist at *LA Weekly*.

To understand the phenomenon of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* or its soundtrack you have to frame it in a historical context. Brother Malcolm called for "freedom by any means necessary," while Brother Martin preached "freedom by peaceful means"… and, unfortunately, they both were shot.

Colored folks woke up to the fact that power concedes nothing without demand; we simply would not be able to sing our way to freedom. The whole notion of being colored in the first place seemed to be an attempt to say we are just colored… only slightly different from white…and were asking the dominant culture to please recognize our humanity and give us a slice of the American pie. But with the assassination of our two civil rights leaders, that dream ended and the Black Power movement began.

Black is the opposite of white. Black being beautiful was not at the expense of white. It just served notice that we were no longer colored folks trying to fit in; we were Black folks…Black and proud.

Out on the streets, the Black Panthers were taking black power to a whole new level but in the cinema there was no reflection of the movement to be found—until Melvin Van Peebles stepped into the void and risked it all to make *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. At long last, badass cinema was born.

After completing his film, only two theaters in the whole United States of America would show it. Van Peebles had self-funded the indie, without the support of the studio Super PAC. He barely had enough bread to finish the film, let alone any left over for an advertising budget. How would he get the word out? The answer came in the form of black radio, college radio or any radio. Yet, the only way to get on radio was music, i.e. the film soundtrack.

My dad found a brand-new group named Earth, Wind & Fire to translate his often raw, avant-garde musical sensibilities and bring them to the big screen. *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* became the highest grossing indie film up until that time (out-grossing *Love Story*), and the soundtrack helped rocket it to the top of the charts.

Melvin Van Peebles may have created *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* out of an artistic and cultural necessity, however, his sacrifice, in essence, empowered and changed the landscape of cinema and its relationship to the music soundtrack. Due to the success of *Sweetback*, soundtracks became a staple of all the badass films and the inevitable Blaxploitation flicks that followed…and it continues to this day.

–MARIO VAN PEEBLES, MARCH, 2017

About Mario Van Peebles

Mario Van Peebles is an award-winning director and the son of Melvin Van Peebles. In 1991, twenty years after Melvin Van Peebles' groundbreaking film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, Mario made his feature film and directorial debut with *New Jack City* whose soundtrack was #1 on the *Billboard* "Top R&B Albums" chart for eight consecutive weeks.

THEY BLED YOUR MAMA
THEY BLED YOUR PAPA
BUT HE WONT BLEED ME

USE YOUR BLACK ASS FROM SUN TO SUN
NIGGERS SCARED AND PRETEND THEY DON'T SEE
DEEP DOWN DIRTY DOG SCARED
JUST LIKE YOU SWEETBACK
JUST LIKE I USED TO BE
WORK YOUR BLACK BEHIND TO THE GUMS
AND YOU SUPPOSED TO THOMAS TELL HE DONE
YOU GOT TO THOMAS SWEETBACK

THEY BLED YOUR BROTHER
THEY BLED YOUR SISTER
YEAH BUT THEY WONT BLEED ME

PROGRESS SWEETBACK
THATS WHAT HE WANTS YOU TO BELIEVE
NO PROGRESS SWEETBACK
HE AINT STOPPED CLUBBING US FOR 400 YEARS
AND HE DONT INTEND TO FOR A MILLION
HE SURE TREAT US BAD SWEETBACK
WE CAN MAKE HIM DO US BETTER
CHICKEN AINT NOTHING BUT A BIRD
WHITE MAN AINT NOTHING BUT A TURD
NIGGER AINT SHIT

GET MY HAND ON A TRIGGER
YOU TALKIN REVOLUTION SWEETBACK
I WANTA GET OFF THESE KNEES
YOU TALKIN REVOLUTION SWEETBACK

YOU CAN'T MAKE IT ON WINGS
WHEELS OR STEEL SWEETBACK
WE GOT FEET
YOU CAN'T GET AWAY ON WINGS
WHEELS OR STEEL SWEETBACK
NIGGERS GOT FEET

IF YOU CANT BEAT EM JOIN EM
THATS WHAT THEY SAY
YOU TALKIN BOUT YESTERDAY
YOU CANT GO ON LIKE THAT SWEETBACK
NOT LONG AS YOUR FACE IS BLACK
YEAH IM BLACK AND IM KEEPIN ON
KEEPIN ON THE SAME OLE WAY
THEY BOPPED YOUR MAMA
THEY BOPPED YOUR PAPA
WONT BOP ME
THEY BOPPED YOUR SISTER
THEY BOPPED YOUR BROTHER
THEY WONT BOP ME

(EVERYBODY)
THEY BURNED OUR MAMAS
THEY BEAT OUR PAPAS
THEY TRICKED OUR SISTERS
THEY CHAINED OUR BROTHERS
WONT BLEED ME
WONT BLEED ME
WONT BLEED ME

HE BLED YOUR BROTHER
HE BLED YOUR SISTER
YOUR BROTHER AND YOUR SISTER TOO
HOW COME IT TOOK ME SO LONG TO SEE
HOW HE GET US TO USE EACH OTHER
NIGGERS SCARED
WE GOT TO GET IT TOGETHER IF HE KICKS A BROTHER
IT GOTTA BE LIKE HE KICKIN YOUR MOTHER
THEY HYPE YOU INTO SOPPING THE
MARROW OUT YOUR OWN BONES
JUSTICE IS BLIND
YEAH AND WHITE TOO
JUSTICE IS BLIND
THE WAY SHE ACTS SHE GOTTA BE
THE MAN IS JIVE
NOT TOO JIVE TO HAVE HIS GAME
UPTIGHT IN YOUR KINKY BEAN

STAND TALL SWEETBACK HE
AINT GONNA LET YOU
IM STANDING TALL ANYWAY
THE MAN KNOW EVERYTHING SWEETBACK
THE MAN KNOW EVERYTHING
THEN HE OUGHT TO KNOW IM
TIRED OF HIM FUCKIN WITH ME

USE YOUR FEET BABY
RUN MOTHERFUCKA
RUN SWEETBACK
HE WONT BLEED ME

Melvin Van Peebles

SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSSS SONG